



# THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO SHOOTING LOCAL LANDSCAPES

Three Lessons For Creating your Best  
Ever Landscape Photos Within 30  
Minutes of Your Front Door

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hello, my name is Tim Smalley. I'm an award-winning forest and woodland photographer based in Hertfordshire. I specialise in photographing trees and forests - especially those close to home.

I'm also deeply passionate about protecting Britain's ancient forests, which have been in rapid decline over the last century.

My decision to dedicate my photography to my local area has been a catalyst in my growth as an artist.



I have built deeper connections with my subjects through familiarity, while also being able to react quickly to optimal weather conditions and light.

My work has been published in both the local and national press in the UK, and my prints are hanging on walls all over the world. I shoot architecture and interiors commercially and also teach photographers how to grow as artists through a relentless focus on producing work close to home.



*Left: the bud burst, when the leaves burst out of their buds, lasts mere days in spring  
Right: That moment when the canopy reaches peak colour before the leaves drop*

## THREE LESSONS FOR CREATING UNIQUE LANDSCAPE PHOTOS ON YOUR DOORSTEP

Many of us dream of capturing the majestic beauty of the Grand Canyon, the drama of the Scottish Highlands, or the serene blues of the Antarctic icebergs.

But what if I told you that you don't need to travel thousands of miles to capture stunning and unique landscape photographs?

The beauty of landscape photography is that it can be done anywhere, even right near your home.



So, now you know that... this is it. It's the first step on your journey to creating the best landscape photos of your life. It's also the fastest way to become a better landscape and nature photographer, because it will help you to shift your mindset and enable you to make amazing photos wherever you are.

But before we do that, let me share a story about my own landscape photography journey.

### A STORY OF STRUGGLE AND DISAPPOINTMENT

When I first got into landscape photography in my 20s, I quickly grew despondent with travelling to exotic locations. That might sound really weird – I bet your wondering how I could not enjoy travelling to some of the most amazing locations in the UK?!

Well, it's not that I didn't enjoy visiting these locations – they're hugely inspiring and thought-provoking – but when you invest so much time and money in getting to these locations, you have certain expectations. And, if the light didn't play ball, I would head home disappointed and despondent.

At the time, I wasn't a full-time professional photographer, so I had very limited time to create photos that were, ultimately, highly dependent on dramatic light at either end of the day.

Often, I had travelled for hours to get to these locations, only to go home with very little to show for it. My mind was closed; I had forgotten to cherish the joy of being out in nature – and, fundamentally, my photography was a one trick pony that was incredibly reliant on dramatic light and/or scenery. It was a recipe for disaster – it was as if I was collecting postcards with my camera.

I was living and working in London at the time, so dramatic locations were at least a few hours away from home. And, after a long week in the office, as much as I wanted to get out into the hills, the idea of doing at least a four hour round trip to get to a location for a few hours of photography began to be a burden rather than an inspiration.

I became obsessed with the weather, but in a bad way – I was finding ways to talk myself out of going out with my camera. I'd tell myself the light probably wouldn't be great, and I'd travel all that way for nothing. It's better to stay at home and get nothing than travel for hours to come home with the same.

## MY TRANSFORMATION

I had fallen into the trap of thinking that landscape photography was all about the grand vista when it is anything but. The reality is that the grand vista is just one part of a much larger genre. For me, creating grand vista images feels more external rather than internal – allow me to explain what I mean.

Grand vista images cause a rush of adrenaline during the making of the image – the anticipation for the light is huge and, if you're not careful, you end up running around like a crazed chicken. While the images got the usual 'wow' and 'amazing' comments, nobody ever asked if they could hang one of these images on their wall. Perhaps they weren't good enough, you ask. Well, a couple of those images have won awards in competitions.



*Heavy snowfall and dramatic light. Being just 20 mins from home, I could react quickly*

In addition, I found that most of these images didn't stand the test of time. On reflection, it was more about the effort put in to get to the location – the literal mountain I'd had to climb to get to the viewpoint – rather than the artistic qualities of the photo itself.

On the other hand, with a genre like forest or intimate landscape photography, the images require a lot of mental effort to create and the successful photos tend to grow on you as time passes.

Now, I don't live in a dramatic location known for its sweeping vistas. I live on the outskirts of London in central Hertfordshire – it's quaint, but not dramatic by any stretch. Yet most of my current portfolio was shot within 30 mins of my front door.

In this guide, I will share the three biggest lessons I've learned after more than 15 years as a landscape photographer. These are the lessons that have enabled me to continually create unique and commercially viable images on my doorstep.

## LESSON 1: YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

The common advice is that to create great photos that convey the stunning beauty of nature, you need to travel to exotic locations.

The vast majority of photography workshops I see advertised are held in amazing locations – and it's easy to understand why: these locations are inspiring and beautiful. Nature has done a lot of the work for you. It also caters to the common misconception that you must travel far and wide to create great photos.

But the reality is that the chances of you being at one of those locations when the conditions are perfect are extremely low. If, like me, you have commitments outside of your work and/or hobby, you are also unlikely to be able to get to these locations at the drop of a hat when nature is putting on a show. Therefore, creating unique shots in unique conditions at these well-visited locations is almost impossible when you don't live there.



First, because everybody else travels to these same locations, and they are using the same guidebooks to navigate to the well-known viewpoints, you will end up getting the same images as everyone else.

Second, you won't have the local knowledge required to create unique photographs that are off the beaten track. I've tried playing that game, and it's tough if you can't commit to weeks at a time exploring these locations.

The truth is that the journey to finding that elusive and unique shot in perfect conditions extends beyond merely possessing technical skills and a keen eye for detail.

One of the often overlooked, but crucial aspects of landscape photography is the role of local or intimate knowledge of a location. Let's delve deeper into why this element is so critical to the art of capturing unique landscape photos.

When I talk about local knowledge, I'm referring to the comprehensive understanding and familiarity with a specific area. This encompasses knowledge of the terrain, the patterns of the weather, the optimal times for achieving the best light for your chosen subject(s), the unique characteristics of the landscape, and even the common species found in the area.

It's the kind of knowledge that is typically acquired by residing in an area or spending a substantial amount of time there, following every path to its conclusion, and immersing yourself in the environment.



*Local knowledge enabled me to plan this image intricately so that all elements of the scene came together as I had envisaged.*

## THE ELEMENT OF PERFECT TIMING

One of the most significant advantages that local knowledge brings to the table is the element of timing. Being aware of when the sun rises and sets, when the fog is most likely to roll in, or when the wildflowers are in full bloom can be the determining factor between a good photograph and a truly great one. Local knowledge equips you with the ability to capture the landscape at its most dramatic and aesthetically pleasing moments.



*Four images of the same scene, captured in what I felt were the perfect conditions for each season - Fog, Heavy Rain, Swirling Mist and a Hoar Frost*

## DISCOVERING UNIQUE PERSPECTIVES

Local knowledge also empowers you to discover unique viewpoints and locations that may not be immediately apparent to casual observers or visitors.

Those who are familiar with the area know the hidden gems of their environment, the paths less travelled, the beautiful viewpoints that aren't featured in local guidebooks. This intimate knowledge can pave the way to more distinctive and original photographs that will help you to stand out from the crowd.

## DECIPHERING THE WEATHER

Weather is a pivotal element in landscape photography and another common misunderstanding is that great weather makes it easier to create great photographs – often the most dramatic weather leads to the most interesting and creatively rewarding photos.

Therefore, having a solid understanding of local weather patterns will enable you to anticipate unique conditions that can result in extraordinary photographs. For instance, knowing when and where you're most likely to see a hoar frost after a cold, humid night, or when a lake or pond is likely to be perfectly still for a mirror-like reflection, can make all the difference.



*Knowing where to go in certain weather forecasts, and where you're most-likely to discover unique opportunities to make photographs.*

## LESSON 2: YOU DON'T THINK THERE ARE ANY INTERESTING LOCATIONS NEAR HOME

The best locations near to your home where you can create unique images are unlikely to be shared widely on Instagram, but it can be a good place to build up your research in the second phase. I would recommend starting in a different place before returning to Instagram later.

In my case, one of the things I look for is ancient woodland. It's by far our most interesting habitat and, having existed largely untouched for more than 400 years, it is likely to have plenty of diversity.

In the UK, ancient woodland is spread wide and far across the country even though there is less than 2.5% of our land still covered in ancient woodland (and only half of that being deciduous forest, in good overall health). Often, these ancient woods can be quite small, but they don't need to be big to make great locations to repeatedly return to with your camera.

In fact, one of my favourite and most productive locations I visit at the moment is an ancient woodland that is no more than 50 acres in size. But, with a quick glance at my Lightroom library, I have around one hundred 'keeper' images, and a solid 20 images in a portfolio, from that location since I first discovered it four years ago.



The first step I take when looking for ancient woodland near me is to do some research. I start by looking into local nature reserves, national parks, areas of outstanding natural beauty, or areas of forest owned by environmental charities such as The Woodland Trust, National Trust, and Wildlife Trusts (these are UK charities, for reference) in your area. These organisations often have valuable information about the ancient woodlands and old growth forests in your vicinity, and often provide detailed information about the site before your first visit.



In addition, you should consult local maps, guidebooks, or online resources that highlight significant natural sites. One of my favourite resources is the Satellite Maps on Bing and Google. And, if you're in the UK, Bing includes Ordnance Survey Maps as an option – this is by far the best dataset on our land, if you know how to read an OS Map. In other regions, consider picking up your local high resolution (1:25,000 or better) maps in paper form if they're not available online.

Another way to find interesting locations near you is by connecting with local conservation groups. These passionate individuals have a wealth of knowledge about the natural beauty in your local area. Joining these groups not only enables you to learn from experts about these locations, but also provides opportunities to participate in guided walks and explorations. By immersing yourself in these communities, you'll gain invaluable insights and discover hidden treasures that other photographers will never discover.

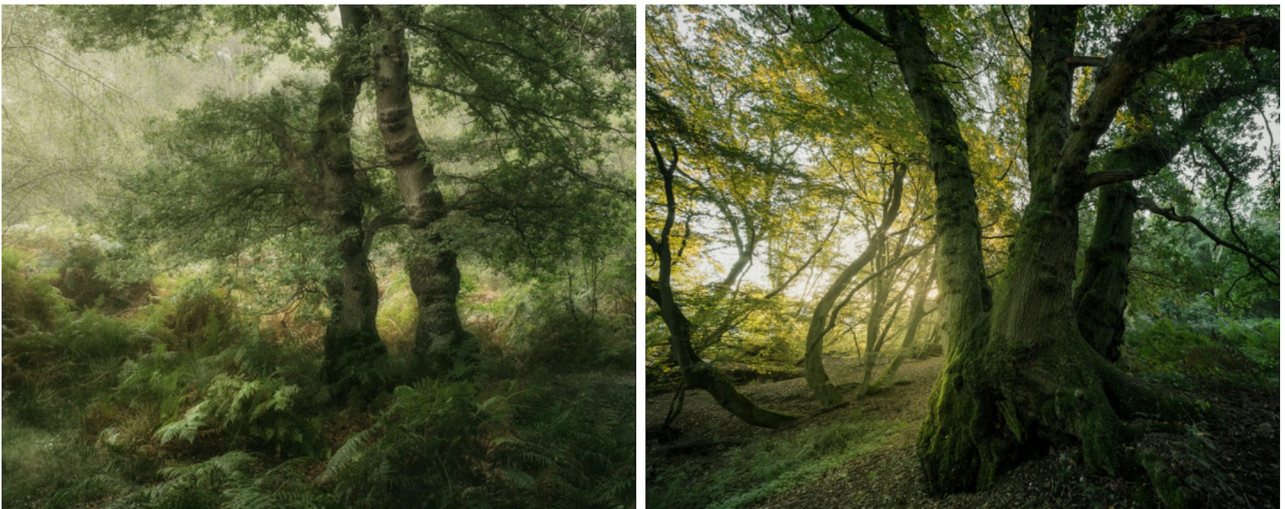
Books on the local history can also provide an interesting insight into what is in your local area. By tapping into local legends and folklore, stories passed down through generations can provide valuable clues about hidden forests and their significance in local culture. Engage with locals, visit nearby historical sites or museums, and dive into the rich tapestry of local stories. You might just stumble upon a tale that leads you to a fairy-tale forest or that perfect lone tree just waiting to be discovered.

Unravelling the mysteries of your local area is a thrilling and rewarding experience. By immersing yourself in nature, connecting with local communities, and embracing the art of exploration, you'll uncover hidden natural treasures near you. So, lace up your walking shoes, grab your binoculars, camera and map, and embark on an adventure that will leave you in awe of what lies just beyond your doorstep. Happy exploring!

## LESSON 3: YOU DON'T PRACTICE THE ART OF PHOTOGRAPHY OFTEN ENOUGH

Have you ever heard of the saying that it takes 10,000 hours to master a craft? It was popularised by Malcolm Gladwell in his book, *Outliers*, where he outlined the rule, as follows: 'It takes 10,000 hours of intensive practice to achieve mastery of complex skills and materials, like playing a violin or getting as good as Bill Gates at computer programming.'

So, be honest, how often and for how long do you practice your photography? And for how long do you practice your image editing? And, considering what we've discussed above, how long do you spend improving your local knowledge?



*Summer, often thought as the down-season for landscape photography, can present some amazing opportunities if you know your local area intimately.*

Of course, the three skills are connected and form the collective 'art' that is photography. So, for simplicity's sake, they are one skill: landscape photography. That means, 3,333 hours of practice out in the field with your camera, 3,333 hours improving your local knowledge, and a further another 3,333 hours of practice in front of your computer. That's 10,000 hours of practice.

But, what do you require to become a competent and skilled landscape photographer? It's not as daunting as what I've laid out above – you simply need to commit frequent time in your diary for a couple of hours out in the field, and then a couple of hours in front of your computer. If you have a dog, use your dog-walks to explore new locations – you're then killing two birds with one stone and you will build up your local knowledge quickly.

Try to visit the same location once a month, and if you're able to get out with your camera once a week, that means finding four locations to explore each month. Within a few months, you will start to get to know these locations – and within a year, you will have a good idea where the best areas are to create photos in each of those locations.

This is the process I use to explore new locations.

This works great in smaller locations, but some of the locations I visit are huge – the largest is well over 5,000 acres. Even after years of visiting, I'm still very much scratching the surface in these, but I work through them methodically rather than being overwhelmed.

To start with, I chop the larger locations into areas of around 50-200 acres – it's not an exact science, but with time you will know what works best for you. I then explore one of these areas over the course of a year. I then move onto another area of the same location and repeat the process. Over time, you will know the areas you want to visit to create photos in certain conditions and, by that time, your local knowledge will be your secret weapon to creating successful images in that location.



*Would you believe it if I told you all four of the images above were made within a few metres of each other, of the same group of trees?*

The process of practicing needs to be quite disciplined too. When I run 1-to-1 workshops with photographers looking to create better photos, I focus a lot on discipline in creating images. It's very easy to take lots of photos, but it's quite difficult to take lots of good photos.

I used to shoot on a 4x5-inch film camera and did so for almost a decade. Every time I clicked the shutter, it cost me £8 – that was the cost of the sheet of film, getting it developed and then scanning it into the computer. Let me tell you, £8 a click really focuses your mind. I was out in the woods at least a couple of times a week, and would shoot around 30 sheets of film a month. That's around 3 sheets of film per visit, on average.

I do scrapbook with my phone (I use an app called Viewfinder) or a smaller camera a lot, but I am extremely disciplined with my big camera even though it's now 'free' every time I click the shutter.



*Finding the right perspective and the ideal position for your camera takes time. Learning the art of composition comes with experimentation and practice.*

## EXERCISE

Find a relatively small location and plot a walking route around it. Walk the same route each time you visit the location with your camera and see what photographs you can create. Walk the route both ways on alternate visits. Aim to get three good photos on each visit. On some visits, you will get more than three good images, but be disciplined – work to look for and create three good photos rather than come home with 30 mediocre photos. You will soon build a portfolio of images from this location.

## BONUS LESSON: THE RULES OF COMPOSITION WILL LIMIT YOUR GROWTH AS AN ARTIST

If you've read any photography magazine in the last decade, you will know that one of the issues each year will have a cover feature on the rules of composition. It will declare that following the rule of thirds will help you create your best photos ever – or one of the other 9 rules.

I used to work in the magazine industry as a journalist, so I speak with knowledge when I say that there are a few hardy perennials that the editors will go back to on an annual basis. These cover features have been tested over many years, and work extremely well on the newsstand where the vast majority of a magazine's sales will come from.

In all honesty, quite early in my photography journey, I used to chuckle at rule 10, which declares that you should break the rules. In other words, the 9 other rules you've been told to follow should be broken on special occasions.

I haven't followed the rules of photography (at least consciously) for about 10 years. Many of my photographs could be shoehorned into one of the rules, but at the time of creation that was never my conscious intent. I spent a lot of time reading about human visual perception and understanding art from the viewers' perspective. It's then for me to reverse engineer that in the field.



*An image that doesn't really follow any rules, but uses lots of compositional concepts.*

Instead of rules, I focus on concepts. An image can employ one concept or employ several concepts concurrently. There are no hard, fast rules. Explaining the concepts in depth is beyond the scope of this guide, but I will outline them below:

- Subject (and the many varieties of subject)
- Use of light
- Use of colour
- Energy flow
- Visual weight
- Emotion
- Interaction
- Balance
- Tension
- Separation
- Contrast
- Framing
- Colour
- Depth
- Texture
- Aspect ratio

I start by recognising and identifying the thing that caught my eye and how it makes me feel. The latter helps me to understand the story I may want to tell through a photograph. I then explore how best to frame the thing that caught my eye. I include everything that compliments or adds context to the story I want to tell, and then I work to eliminate anything that detracts from, competes with, or draws my eye away from the story.

Every decision I make has a consequence on the composition of the image, so I focus my time on working out the best and most satisfactory outcome for the photograph – sometimes, this is instinctive, but on other occasions, you must work quite hard for it. You end up moving the camera around a lot, changing focal lengths and even the aspect ratio. Don't force it, though – if you're still not satisfied after 10 or 15 minutes of trying to find the right image, it may be that there isn't an image to be had after all.

## WANT TO LEARN MORE?

If you want to fast-track your journey to mastering landscape photography, why not book a [1-to-1 photography workshop](#) with me? We'll explore one or two locations together, and we can build your confidence in the field so that you will be able to create unique photographs in your local area.

**BOOK NOW**

